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UNCLAS E F T O SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000490

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA, DRL, AND CA  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ASEC](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: NATIONAL WORK STOPPAGE SET FOR  
JAN. 28-29

REF: A. (A) SANTO DOMINGO 355

[1](#)B. (B) SANTO DOMINGO 414

[1](#)1. (SBU) A national work stoppage ("huelga" in Spanish), set for January 28-29, is likely to disrupt or close down many businesses across the country and cause scattered violence in low-income neighborhoods of the capital and smaller cities. The Coordinator of Popular and Labor Organizations promoting the work stoppage includes community, student, and labor groups and small leftist parties -- essentially the same coalition that prompted a similar "huelga" November 11, which left eight persons dead. The goal is to protest the government's economic policies, depressed economic conditions, and rising prices of basic consumer goods. The leftist "Force of the Revolution" has also distributed posters calling for President Mejia's resignation, but other striking groups have disavowed that demand. Anticipating the larger stoppage (and repeating an action a year ago), doctors in public hospitals on January 27 walked out to demand higher salaries and more equipment and medicines, paralyzing all but emergency services.

[1](#)3. (U) President Mejia appointed an interagency commission headed by Labor Secretary Milton Ray Guevara to dialogue with the strike organizers, who have refused the offer. Ray Guevara said the commission stands ready to meet with them "wherever they decide" and expressed readiness to deal with the issues, except some demands that would be impossible to meet, such as doubling wages or suspending the IMF accord. The Archbishop of Santiago supported the proposal of dialogue, other church and civic leaders, and officials of the three main political parties have called for peaceful behavior by strikers and authorities.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Front-running presidential candidate (former president) Leonel Fernandez (PLD), during a campaign march in Santo Domingo January 26, told thousands of flag-waving marchers that the people "have ample reason to protest" because of economic and social problems and claimed that President Mejia in seeking re-election intended to "create a dictatorship." PRSC candidate Eduardo Estrella said publicly that people had become "desperate" economically and that he supported the strike.

[1](#)5. (SBU) There is widespread anxiety in the media and among our contacts about potential violence during the strike. Some of our sources claim that opposition parties and PRD dissidents are distributing money to agitators to provoke violence and make President Mejia look bad. We have heard of telephoned threats to businesses that did not close during the November strike, urging them to act differently this time. In a pre-strike demonstration at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo on January 23, students threw rocks and burned two vehicles before police took control. An official told us that on the main highway north of the capital January 27, protestors blocked the road, beat a truck driver, threw rocks at passing motorists, and provoked police to fire in the air.

[1](#)6. (SBU) The National Police will provide the visible security presence on streets, with the military kept in discreet reserve. Police began pre-emptive arrests of suspected strike organizers January 26 -- a practice banned by legal reforms announced in 2003 -- and, according to the press, searched the home of a labor leader without a warrant January 27. Police roadblocks on access roads into Santo Domingo, to apprehend any weapons being brought into the city, caused traffic tie-ups January 27. Official sources told us the police would enter poorer neighborhoods to try to confine rock throwing or tire burning to small areas, but would withdraw at nightfall. Consequently, authorities expect disorders to increase around dusk. Police have identified several areas of the capital and northern towns such as Navarrete and Bonao as likely venues for "intense" protests. A detailed list of such locations is available on [www.usemb.gov.do](http://www.usemb.gov.do).

17. (SBU) The work stoppage comes just before expected disbursements by international financial institutions and against a backdrop of political tension as the election campaign gets underway. The ruling PRD was set to reintroduce a bill to amend the electoral law (Ref A) -- which most opposition politicians oppose -- in the Senate where passage would be guaranteed by an overwhelming PRD majority. President Mejia, following his victory in a primary that was boycotted by other serious PRD candidates (Ref B), was planning a January 31 convention to confirm him as the controversial candidate for re-election. Vice President Milagros Ortiz Bosch, one of the President's strongest challengers in the PRD, reassumed her post as Education Secretary January 26 and ceased most of her campaign activities, prompting speculation that she would drop out of the presidential race.

HERTELL